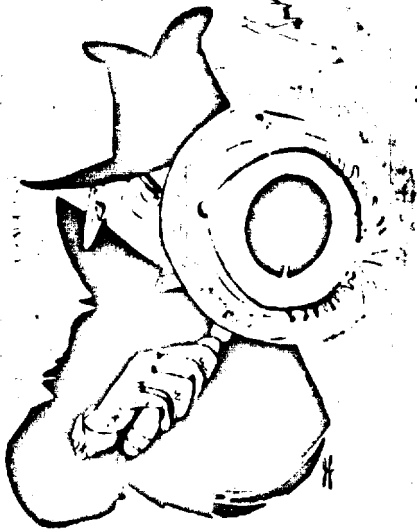


How Effective Is Our Intelligence



When the United States is taken badly unawares, as it was in Korea—and earlier at Pearl Harbor and the Battle of the Bulge—the first fall guy is bound to be our intelligence service. The latter includes, of course, the intelligence operations of the State, Army, Navy, and Air Force Departments, and those of the relatively new Central Intelligence Agency, all of which produce what is technically known as high-level foreign positive intelligence.

In plain language this "intelligence" is nothing more than the knowledge that our highest officials must possess about other countries. When it is full and accurate, these officials have the basic ingredient of national security; when it is not, they are likely to jeopardize our fate out of sheer ignorance. This knowledge must encompass history, geography, economics, and politics. It must include data on the things that do not change, such as a country's terrain, data on things that are continually changing, such as its military establishment or its economic life; and above all, it must include reasoned estimates of what is likely to happen at

some specified future time. When this knowledge enables our leaders to foretell the rough outlines of the possible and the probable, they possess the first requisite for a foreign policy worthy of the name. In the matter of Korea, it looks as if our high-level foreign positive intelligence did not foretell exactly what was going to happen and when.

There are three main techniques by which an intelligence service might have made an estimate of what was brewing and when the broth would boil.

First, on the assumption that the North Korean government did not begin its unannounced attack without the permission of, or instructions from, Moscow, there must have been some secret communications between the two capitals. They could have gone by radio, telephone, or telegraph, by pouch, or by confidential courier. If they went by any of these routes they probably contained pretty exact information upon what was to be done and at what time. The interception of such messages is a technique that intelligence services have used with success in the past. Upon occasions ciphers have been cracked, confidential pouches rifled, and couriers kidnaped. But the business of reading the other man's mail is extremely difficult and extremely hazardous—difficult because all his skill is centered on keeping you from doing just that, and hazardous because if he catches you he catches you in a very unfriendly act. Clandestine interception as an intelligence method is so tough and dangerous a game that peace-loving peoples have upon occasion unilaterally and more or less publicly renounced it.

Second, there is the technique of espionage, which usually accompanies the former method and sometimes supersedes it in effectiveness. At the

Rover-Boy level, your spy is the other man's Minister of Foreign Affairs or Chief of Staff. At lower levels your spies range from important and trustworthy men with good contacts down to thoroughly untrustworthy characters who have spied in the past and will spy in the future for anyone able to pay. Often this lowest category of professional works for both sides until caught at it—and then he works no more.

The difficulties of building an efficient espionage system are likewise great. You must recruit men and women intelligent and well trained enough to know the importance of a seemingly trivial fact when they encounter it, and men and women wise enough to ask the right person the right question in the right way and be able to understand and transmit the highly technical answer when they get it. The would-be spy must have a natural or carefully contrived "cover" occupation under which he can learn the other man's secrets without revealing his mission. When you are finally ready to place your man, you must then provide communications for him. This is a final and almost overpowering obstacle. If he uses the communications of your official foreign mission (embassy, legation, consulate, or other) and is uncovered, his activities may prove to be a major embarrassment to the conduct



of your foreign relations all over the world. Other communications are so difficult to establish or so risky you may not feel able to try them.

It goes without saying, then, that successful espionage systems are built up not in months and years, but literally over decades and even centuries. If the United States possesses an espionage system, and if it fell short in Korea, the most logical explanation lies with our newness to the game. We had no national espionage service as such until the Second World War.

The third technique by which intelligence may work can be called the overt technique. Over the long pull this technique is by all odds the most workable and useful. No social or political entity the size of a modern state can hide its physical self, nor can it stay alive without telling its citizens what it wants them to know and do. The nature of its climate, terrain, communications system, and general economic and political structure is almost unavoidably public property, and a government obviously cannot keep secret what it wants its citizens to do and what its official attitudes are. A country's press and radio, its published laws, and its foreign policy, taken with a knowledge of its physical being and its history, will often reveal important courses of action to come. For instance, during the last war the Japanese, probably by way of building home morale, told their people over the radio what splendid airplane fuel they were able to make out of pine roots or some such improbable substance. What they unavoidably told their enemy's overt intelligence was that they had run out of gasoline.

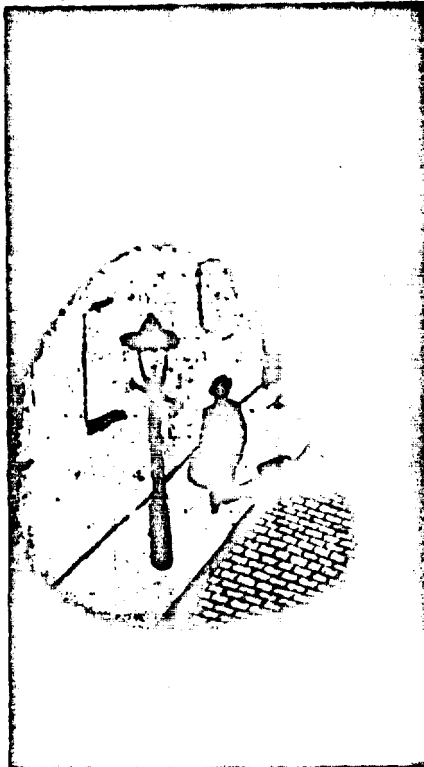
By the same token, a staff of trained people in South Korea, and perhaps another staff in Washington, could read the North Korean press, listen to that country's radio programs, listen to Moscow's programs devoted to or beamed at North Korea, talk with people who are getting letters or receiving visitors from North Korea—could, in short, use all the research techniques known to social scientists the world over.

But the overt intelligence technique is not easy just because it is open, and it will not unlock all the other man's secrets.

In the first place, it requires its practitioners to wade through an uncounted myriad of data—relevant, irrelevant,

slanted, falsified, out of date, and elliptical. Without the practitioner's background knowledge of languages, research techniques, disciplines of study, and so on, the welter of data is not much more than a jumble of nonsense.

There are many important secrets that the overt technique cannot reveal. The North Koreans could not have concealed the rough outlines of their bellicose posture if they had tried their utmost. The discerning of this posture is about as much as could have been



expected of the overt intelligence technique. So long as the North Koreans kept the precise details of the time, weight, and place of their attack out of the press and off the air, overt intelligence could only make reasoned speculations about these matters.

Over the long pull, then, the overt technique may give us most of what we need to know; over the short pull it may let us down disastrously. Only when it is augmented and supported by other techniques can we expect to enjoy reasonable security.

Even the best intelligence cannot give the basis for perfect security. It cannot because the men who have to make the ultimate decisions—the President, his Cabinet, key members of Congress, and

the Joint Chiefs of Staff—can never be absolutely certain that the findings of even the best intelligence are absolutely correct. In this fact we find a likely reason for our being apparently caught off guard on the 38th parallel.

Let us begin with the possible frailties of the best intelligence. In a free society in which individuality and independent opinion are the keystones, there are almost invariably two or more evaluations of a set of data and two or more interpretations of its meaning. Any important situation is generally complicated, and therefore the most that intelligence can do is to choose one interpretation and argue more strongly for it than for a second. But the second, and even a third and fourth, are there. They are implicit in those invariable "possibles," "probables," and "not impossibles" that sprinkle every intelligence estimate.

In the Second World War there was a situation during which intelligence reported a certain aspect of enemy strength with almost perfect exactness. Certain officers read these reports, and for what was nothing more than whimsy parading as judiciousness, chose to doubt their accuracy and impugn the source. The whimsical doubters won adherents. Thus there came into existence a second point of view that sober and studious men had to overcome before they could act on the basis of the reports.

The next thing to consider is that final decisions on action are not taken by intelligence, but by the people responsible for policy and operations. These men are the consumers of intelligence. Suppose that you are Mr. Truman or Mr. Acheson, and the situation is that of Korea in the fortnight before the invasion. You are sure that relations between North and South Korea are tense, you know that the Soviet Union is capable of needling the North Koreans into action, and you are certain that you do not want this to happen.

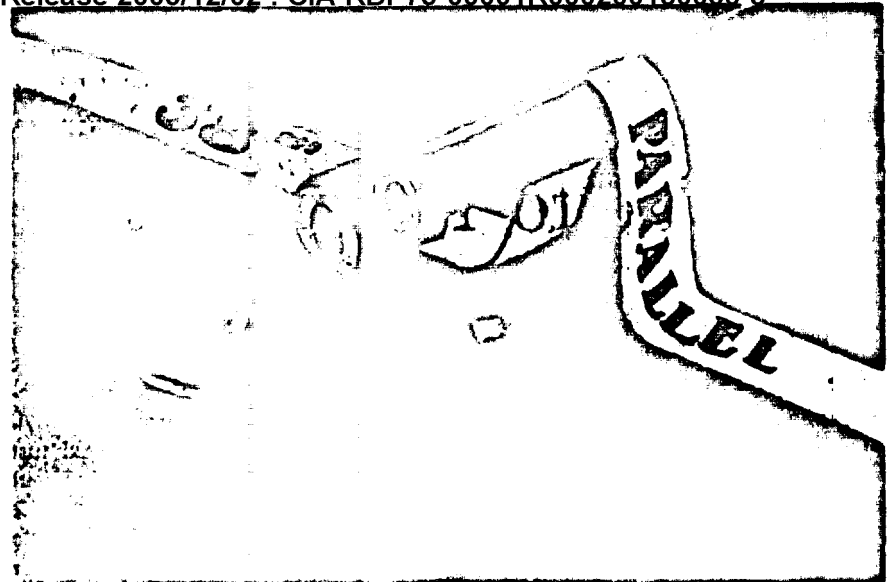
One morning intelligence gives you an estimate that trouble will begin in twenty-four hours. At first you may feel like taking immediate and irrevocable steps. Your next reaction is to wonder about the accuracy of intelligence. You realize that the North Koreans might want to mislead you into thinking that they were about to attack so that you would take what the world would con-

strue as an aggressive attitude, thus playing straight into their hands. You also realize that some South Koreans, tired of the local situation, might want to liquidate it by getting you embroiled at no matter what cost. These South Koreans might have planted misinformation with your overt observers or clandestine agents. Other knowledge from other intelligence sources might confirm your doubts. Your decision is not easy, and if you delay in taking the untraceable step, it should be understandable to your fellow citizens.

Now this sort of thing could happen even if our top-drawer foreign positive intelligence were at a peak of perfection. Those of us who saw our intelligence apparatus at its wartime best, and also saw what happened to it in the first postwar year, may be permitted some reasonable doubt as to its present stature.

To begin with, as of mid-1945 we possessed, in our military intelligence, in our Office of Strategic Services, and in some of our other war agencies, a fine national intelligence arm. It had developed a host of new analytical skills and techniques. It possessed a vast storehouse of general information on every conceivable topic, much of it systematically filed and indexed. It had established and was maintaining a myriad of sources for new information. It had secure communications. It had told German tank and oil production with uncanny accuracy. It knew as much about Japanese merchant-shiping losses and the strength of the Japanese air force as the Japanese themselves.

It was a sad experience to see this mechanism not demobilized but demolished, to paraphrase General Marshall's remark on our military establishment. This happened first of all because Americans did not face up at once to their postwar responsibilities. They mistakenly considered an intelligence system one of the tools of war, and the tools of war and the number of warriors were to be reduced to a size that conformed to an isolationist Senator's guess as to what constituted our national security. A first-rate intelligence service, not merely a Central Intelligence Agency, was a basic requirement for a power carrying our world responsibilities, but this point was hard to sell to the voters and to



Congress. It was hard to sell to some important officers of the executive branch of the government. The State Department, under Mr. Byrnes, almost destroyed what could have become its first effective intelligence setup. General Marshall and Mr. Acheson tried to repair the damage, but the task was not easy. After Mr. Byrnes's fateful decision, the budget people and the appropriations committees of Congress made a rebuilding to strength impossible.

Meanwhile the armed services gave their intelligence branches no more than prorated shares of drastically reduced budgets, putting no higher premium on intelligence as a peacetime security device than they had before. Nor had the calling of intelligence won the prestige it deserved. Able officers continued to look upon an assignment to intelligence almost as a blot upon their records, because they knew that such an assignment—no matter how brilliantly filled—would have little or no effect upon promotion.

To be sure, the Central Intelligence Agency came into being officially with the National Security Act of 1947, and it received all the funds it requested from Congress. But dollars alone cannot build an intelligence team overnight. Dollars alone cannot bring back the disillusioned expert on Korea, the East Indies, or the international oil situation who quit Intelligence Service X or Y when his staff was cut down in 1946 to three untried incompetents from the permanent Civil Service list.

He went back to his business, his law office, his museum, or his university with a heavy heart.

In these terms, if our intelligence was at a peak of perfection in early 1950, there is room for surprise and self-congratulation. If this was the case any errors that may have been committed were those of judgment, not those of ignorance. But if our knowledge of the situation in Korea was faulty because our intelligence work was poor, whom are we to blame? Not the real professionals in the intelligence services, who are the ones most likely to have been aware of the shortcomings of their staffs and the most insistent that remedies be taken at once. We should be almost equally charitable toward those now in intelligence who were put there because they belonged to the correct branch of the armed services, had the correct rank, and were available, even though they knew almost nothing of intelligence work, and disliked what they had heard of it.

We should be a lot less charitable toward the people who assigned such men to intelligence. Personally I would not be at all charitable toward our fellow citizens, their representatives in Congress, and their officers in the executive branch of the government who never bothered to find out that knowledge is power, that the goal of intelligence is the production of the most powerful kind of knowledge, and that dollars and efforts spent on intelligence in peacetime can purchase a higher quantum of national security than any other. —SHERMAN KENT